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OF

UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND

by

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Introduction

As the Department of Defense (DOD) stands up its newest combatant command to concentrate attention on Africa, we must realize that our goal is not to win African hearts and minds and make them like us. It is about making them choose us from among their choices of potential partners and allies. How can the United States (US) manage the African states' perception of Africa Command (AFRICOM) as well as those of other powers involved in Africa so that America's interests can be best pursued? African nations have many suitors, including Russia and China. In order to successfully compete against these suitors, the US must build a credible case, based on truth and transparency, which makes a pro-American choice the logical outcome. In order for America to attain and sustain its credibility, Africans must perceive that America's goals are in their best interests as well.

The AFRICOM area of operations consists of 900 million people in 53 nations speaking over 1,000 languages, thus its perceptual terrain is "rugged." [1] How does the US military communicate to traverse this perceptually rugged terrain? Does our current communications strategy match the terrain? Russia and China also have interests in Africa, particularly those related to the pursuit of natural resources. How will their actions attempt to influence African perceptions of AFRICOM?

A synopsis of the predominant frames and narratives used in Western and African cultures will provide background for understanding how some Africans may interpret US actions in the AFRICOM area of operations. In addition, a brief review of survey data of African opinions about America and African perceptions of US intentions will provide a foundation for describing the perceptual landscape AFRICOM must navigate. A discussion of basic communications principles for simple and rugged perceptual terrains will point to possible

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alternative courses of actions for managing perceptions. After reviewing these possible alternatives, a survey of current African perceptions of AFRICOM, followed by a brief review of Russian and Chinese involvement in Africa, will provide context for discussing how near-peer actions in pursuit of natural resources may influence African perceptions of American involvement in the region. After reviewing the current state of the perceptual landscape and considering these near-peer state actors, this paper will propose a strategy for determining the way forward.

Frames and Narratives in Western and African Cultures

In order to understand how perceptions can be managed, one must first understand the concepts of frames and narratives and how they might apply in the AFRICOM area of operations. Framing is a mass communications concept which has gained increased usage recently in the fields of social psychology, public opinion, and media studies.[2] Frames bundle key concepts, stock phrases, and iconic images together to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting events.[3] In other words, frames promote a particular interpretation of events.

The combination of similar frames create a narrative, which present events or stories in a certain light to create or reinforce perceptions. Narratives are often infused with the cultural traditions of the native society. So, it is not surprising that the same events can be perceived differently by different cultures. Noted American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset suggests that American cultural values place a high emphasis on individualism, freedom, democracy, and capitalism and that the American news media reflect those values.[4] Conversely, traditional African social values stress group orientation, continuity, harmony, and balance.

These values require the individual to subjugate personal needs into a group-satisfying framework.[5]

Western press tradition places emphasis on reporting facts. Though these facts may be open to interpretation, from the Western perspective, the US media is generally seen as operating with a sense of professionalism and objectivity. According to noted media scholar Lance W. Bennet, this practice of objectivity consists of standards of journalistic behavior which include balance, the idea of the journalist as a neutral observer, and editorial review to preclude printing factual errors.[6]

While African media is influenced by Western press traditions, it has its own unique characteristics. According to African media specialist Dr. Louise M. Bourgault, African means of communication are primarily based on oral communication rather than the written word.[7] Thus, it places more relative emphasis on fitting information into oral narrative story-forms. In order to complete the story-form, traditional media may fill in any factual gaps. Thus, from the Western perspective, some African media reports seem more akin to fiction writing and sometimes include mention of conspiracy theories or miracles.[8] African narratives often involve shifting frames which, from the Western perspective, bend facts into group-satisfying frameworks.

This brief overview of cultural effects on framing and narratives leads to some preliminary conclusions regarding perceptions. One could expect news coverage of the same event in the American media to be more "professional," objective, and descriptive in style, while coverage in the African media to be more personal, interpretive, sensational, and stylistically akin to oral communication.[9] One might expect an American interpretation of events to focus on

individual motives, whereas African interpretations might instead frame events based on larger group concerns and their effects on the wider community.[10]

How does this different perspective affect African perceptions? A review of African media reaction to the September 11th, 2001 attacks is very enlightening. Almost every African editorial writer thought the attacks were horrible. However, most thought the underlying reasons for the attacks were rooted in the "swaggering manner in which America carried out its global leadership role."[11] The African opinion writers were nearly unanimous in framing the attacks as a response to American Middle East policies and Washington's failure to redress global inequities. Africans fit the attacks in a narrative of America being punished for its unilateral foreign policy, citing examples such as rejecting the Kyoto Global Warming Treaty, withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and not attending the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa (the US boycotted because other nations and some non-governmental organizations planned on using the conference as a platform to denounce Israel).[12] And in terms of a proper response, African opinion makers were true to their collective social values, recommending slow, multilateral deliberations to develop an internationally-sanctioned response. "The US must get its foreign policy act together and stop living in the ivory tower of politics where it listens only to itself or its blue-chip equals. The time has come for it to sit down with its enemies…It is not money, military might, or a well-funded Pentagon or CIA that will save America. Only thoughtfulness and respect for humanity."[13] So wrote John Kamau in Kenya's *Daily Nation*, east Africa's most influential newspaper.

From the perspective of most Americans, placing even the slightest responsibility on the US for the 9/11 attacks is illogical. Yet, this is not the case for most Africans. Though the attacks may have been unjustified, some African's think the larger group as a whole (which

includes the US) is also partially responsible. As AFRICOM begins operations, we must be

cognizant of the role culture plays in generating frames and narratives. In addition to

predominant frames and narratives, in order to manage African perceptions of AFRICOM, we

must also be knowledgeable of the current opinions Africans have of Americans.

African Opinions of America

In 2005, Government Accountability Office polling found that anti-Americanism was

spreading and deepening around the world.[14] This negative perception increased foreign public

support for terrorism directed at America, raised the cost and reduced the effectiveness of US

military operations overseas, weakened the ability of the US to align with other nations in pursuit

of common policy objectives, and dampened the foreign public's enthusiasm for American

business services and products.[15] In response to these developments, the US government has

sponsored many studies of America's image abroad. A review of these studies as they relate to

African opinions regarding America can help shed light on how AFRICOM can better manage

its perception, and the perception of others acting in the AFRICOM area of operations.

Analysis of recent opinion polls in Africa gives us cause for both hope and concern.

While more regions think that the spread of American ideas and customs is bad rather than good,

these attitudes are less severe in Africa than in other parts of the world.[16] Indeed, public opinion

data shows that Africans are generally pro-American rather than anti-American in their

attitudes.[17] These pro-American opinions are typified by the popularity of President George W.

Bush's African AIDS initiative.

According to the Gallup International Association's 2004 Voice of the People Annual Survey, besides North America, Africa is the only region where a larger percentage of the citizens responded that American foreign policy has an overall positive effect as opposed to a negative effect.[18] BBC World Service worldwide polls in 2005, 2006, and 2007 indicate that Africa is the region of the world with the most positive view of the United States.[19] The 2002 Pew Global Attitudes survey mirrored these results.[20]

A review of the internal numbers of the Pew Global Attitudes African surveys reveals quite interesting patterns. It seems that religion has the greatest effect on attitudes towards America, with Muslims having a more negative view of America than Catholics or other Christians.[21] Wealth has the next largest effect, with wealthier Africans having more pro-American attitudes.[22] Age has a negative effect on attitudes about America, meaning that older Africans are less supportive of America than younger Africans.[23]

Further analysis of the polling data suggest that attitudes about the US depend less on how much people hear about the US and more on who they hear it from.[24] Personal contacts with family and friends who have travelled to or lived in the US tend to expand support.[25] Exposure to television and international news programs tend to expand support as well.[26] More diversified information sources such as radio and the Internet seem to reduce support for the US.

Television viewers in Africa are likely watching state-owned television channels, especially when watching news programming.[27] Since most African governments are dependent on Western aid, it seems logical that they would be wary of publicly criticizing their donors.[28] Privately owned radio stations present a different story. In 1985, there were only ten independent radio stations on the entire African continent. By 2003, there were at least 80 in South Africa alone.[29] With relatively few government controls, African "talk radio" presents a

less uniform view of America. In fact, it is generally perceived as more negative towards the US.

A strong correlation exists between pro-American attitudes and support for globalization in Africa.[30] This not to say that Africans are entirely satisfied with the way the US conducts its affairs in Africa. But it appears that with Africa, pro-American attitudes are closely tied to the perception of the United States as the land of political and economic opportunity.[31]

So, why are Africans so approving of the United States relative to other parts of the world? First, Africans are exposed to positive images of the United States in their media. African governments dependent on foreign aid are leery of offending Western donors, so government-controlled media such as television will likely continue to deliver positive American images to their masses.[32] Additionally, some US policies, such as the aforementioned initiative to fight AIDS in Africa, are met with approval. But this is not the case with all of America's policies.

What seems to be influencing Muslims is not whether or not they like American ideals about democracy, or business practices, or culture, but its foreign policies.[33] The radicalization of Muslims worldwide might be influencing Muslims in Africa.[34] There is also a lower appreciation for American culture among African Muslims.[35] This feeling is not universal among all African Muslims, but the trend is negative. A key reason for this trend is the perception of unbiased support for Israel, which is advanced by influence from Arab Muslims

The results of these surveys imply that greater access to American goods, business opportunities, cultural exchanges, and democracy assistance would be welcomed by Africans and would help the US maintain its relative positive image among the African public.[36] Overall, America benefits from its image as a source of economic and political opportunity. It would

seem that AFRICOM could benefit from this reservoir of relative perceptual positivity. But a brief overview of current American strategic communications practices highlight obstacles which must be overcome.

Communications Strategies

The communication model underlying American strategic communication practices dates back to the 1950s, and draws heavily on an analogy comparing human communication to the telephone system[37]. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver were not social scientists but engineers working for Bell Telephone Labs in the United States. Their goal was to ensure the maximum efficiency of telephone cables and radio waves. They developed a model of communication which was intended to assist in developing a mathematical theory of communication. In making information "measurable" they gave birth to the mathematical study of information theory. Shannon and Weaver developed a model based on this idea, defining communication as a process in which one's mind uses messages to affect another mind.[38] Their model (see Figure 1) assumes that a sender (information source) has a message encoded by a transmitter. The transmitter changes the message into a signal which is sent through some channel. During transmission, the signal may be degraded by noise. This possibly degraded signal is received and decoded back into a message, which then reaches its destination. The purpose of the message is to influence the receiver to understand the information the same way the source does, and to persuade him to change his attitudes or act in a particular way. This model is called the message influence model because it portrays messages as vehicles for carrying information from a sender to a receiver.[39]

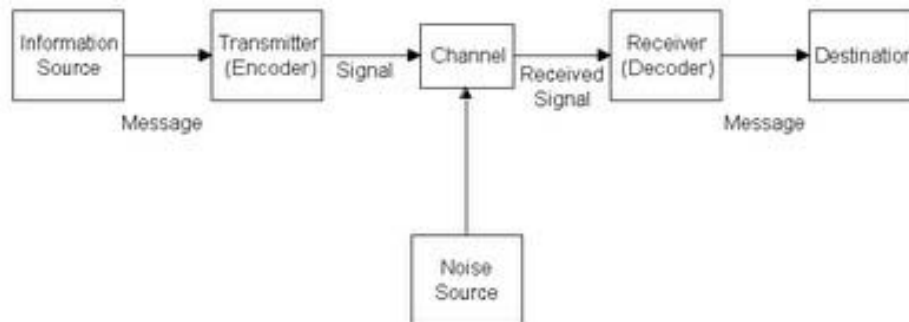## The Shannon-Weaver Mathematical Model, 1949

Figure 1

There are several assumptions underlying successful implementation of the Shannon-Weaver-based message influence model. The first assumption is that the message will get through unless there is interference with the sender-receiver connection. The solution to overcoming noise is to either remove the source of interference or boost the power of the message. Another assumption is that simple messages are better than complicated ones, since simple messages are easier to encode and decode, and are less likely lost in translation. Also, simple messages are easier to send, so repeatedly transmitting the same message will increase the probability of successful receipt at the destination.

When managing perceptions, the optimal message has the most positive effect on the target audience. And this positive effect is in concert with strategic goals. The right message must be made of many things - the proper words, conveying the correct themes and sentiments, delivered the right way by the best messenger, in the most appropriate medium, and at the right time.[40] In a highly structured communications system, communicating the best message is done by optimizing each sub-component of the message.

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Variations of the Shannon-Weaver model have dominated Western communications practices for nearly 50 years. This model pervades post-9/11 thinking about public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations, and media strategy in the US government.[41] In January of 2003, President George W. Bush created the White House Office of Global Communications.[42] Its mission is "to ensure consistency in messages that will promote the interest of the United States abroad, prevent misunderstanding, build support for and among coalition partners, and inform international audiences."[43] It does this by using information teams to disseminate accurate and timely information to the news media.

But is this the proper way to achieve the best effect? It depends on the nature of the perceptual landscape. Evolutionary biologist Stuart Kauffman invented the rugged landscape model to describe how a system of components (e.g. components of a message) continuously evolves over time to optimize performance in an environment.[44] The rugged landscape model has been used to examine biological and economic systems. The model can be displayed pictorially as a plot with a peak or peaks, with peaks representing the goal or target.

When applied to communications, finding the right message means adjusting the various subcomponents until the most desired positive effect takes place on the target audience. In other words, one reaches the top of a peak. On a simple landscape ($K \leq 1$, see Figure 2), the effectiveness of a particular communications effort can be measured by how high it goes up the singular peak. In a simple landscape, the search for the best message is relatively uncomplicated. One moves across the landscape in a systematic way, looking for any path that leads uphill. One can use multiple search parties using the same strategy; as long as you are heading uphill, you are making progress.
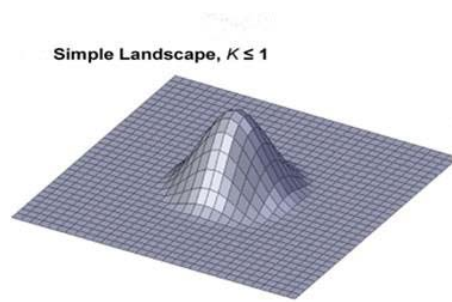
Simple Landscape, $K \le 1$

Figure 2

But what if your landscape is rugged? On a rugged landscape (K>1, see Figure 3), there are multiple peaks. In a rugged perceptual landscape, different peaks of varying heights can be caused by different elements such as multiple themes, variation in members of the intended audience, misinterpretation of messages, different media channels, etc.[45] On a rugged perceptual landscape, the search for the best message can be complex, and fraught with unexpected twists and turns. The search for the highest peak does not just involve looking for any uphill direction because uphill might lead to a suboptimal solution (one of the lower peaks).[46] If you are on top of one of the lower peaks, you may have to go downhill for a while in order to get to a higher peak. And when you find what seems to be a good solution, it might not be the best solution – it could just be the highest peak near you. So, having a good solution does not mean you have the best solution. You may use multiple search parties, but you may not be able to coordinate their efforts using a common strategy.
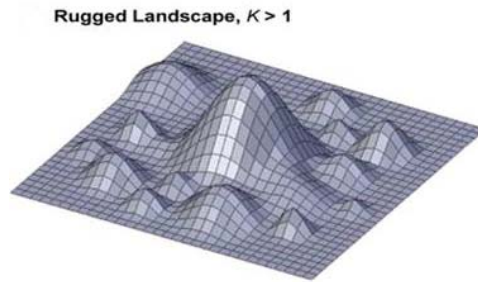
Rugged Landscape, $K > 1$

<p style="text-align:center">**Figure 3**</p>

How we view AFRICOM's perceptual landscape is crucial to how we manage the perceptions of our actions in Africa. Is the landscape simple? Or is it rugged? If the landscape is simple, then the tightly controlled message influence model currently employed is the right strategy for managing perceptions. But if the landscape is rugged, managing perceptions for the best effect may require a more flexible approach.

A brief overview of cultural and geo-political factors clearly illustrates the ruggedness of the perceptual terrain. There is more cultural and genetic variation in Africa than on any other continent, with five major indigenous language families and 1000-3000 separate languages. There is no single, standardized system of beliefs and behavior throughout the continent. Islam, Christianity, and the world's other major religions are present, but in variations that are relatively unknown to the West. African brands of religion readily borrow ideas and are very eclectic. "Traditional" African beliefs include the existence of a variety of spirit beings, a prominent role for ancestors, and faith in the spiritual power of political leadership.

The perceptual terrain is further ruggedized by the continued dependence on external patrons. Past colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain continue to play a role in African affairs. As Africans struggled to gain their independence in the 20th Century, China and the Soviet Union intervened on behalf of anti-colonial movements. The

fact that Russia and China had no colonies in Africa gave them added credibility, as they framed

their assistance as a common struggle against capitalist oppression. But there was no united,

communist front guiding their interventions. The differences between styles of communism led

the Chinese and Soviets to pursue divergent agendas. This also complicates the perceptual

terrain.

Finding the right message to navigate this rugged perceptual terrain will be a difficult task.

Determining current African perceptions of AFRICOM can assist in providing a method for

finding the most effective approach.

African Perceptions of the US and AFRICOM

Most Africans view AFRICOM with a mixture of skepticism and suspicion. In testimony

given to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Dr. Wafula Okuma, head of the African

Security Analysis Program at the Pretoria, South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies,

stated that "all things considered it (AFRICOM) could be seen that the whole idea is, to a large

extent, a bureaucratic issue with the US government on the best way of promoting American

interests in Africa, securing investments in oil sources, fighting off Chinese competition and

waging war against terrorism."[47] Thus, AFRICOM is perceived as the reorganization of the US

military to better position forces for possible conflict in the region.

Dr. Okuma is not alone in his assessment. Michele Ruiters of *Business Day*

(Johannesburg, South Africa's largest newspaper) stated that "AFRICOM would destabilize an

already fragile continent and region, which will be forced to engage with US interests on military

terms".[48] "Ironically, AFRICOM was announced as Chinese President Hu Jintao was touring

eight African nations to negotiate deals that will enable China to secure oil flows from Africa" stated the editorial of the *Daily Nation* (Nairobi, Kenya's largest newspaper).[49] "How can the US divide the world up into its own military commands? Wasn't that for the United Nations to do? What would happen if China also decided to create its own Africa command? Would this not lead to conflict on the continent?"[50] So stated the Libyan Ambassador to South Africa.

Why are African perceptions of AFRICOM based on suspicion? It is likely that African perceptions are influenced by the prevailing frames which favor and seek to perpetuate traditional social values of group orientation, continuity, harmony, and balance. For instance, any African country which hosted the AFRICOM's headquarters could be criticized by the rest of the continent for violating African defense and security norms, which strongly discourages hosting foreign troops on African soil.[51] These norms stem from Africa's colonial history, which is characterized by military occupations, exploitation of its natural resources, and suppression of its people. "After tasting decades of independence, these countries are now jealously guarding their sovereignty and are highly suspicious of foreigners, even those with good intentions" Dr. Okuma stated.[52] UN forces, composed of troops from several nations working under a negotiated, multilateral mandate would be perceived as operating within African norms of group orientation and balance. Troops from a single, powerful nation, such as the US, would more likely be perceived as disrupting the relative harmony.

So, it seems that Africans are concerned that AFRICOM will severely undermine multilateralism on the continent. Africans have adopted multilateralism as the predominant mode of addressing their collective problems. Intra-African organizations such as the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have formed

over the past few years to provide forums to address issues. And AFRICOM is perceived by some as a way to counter the current trend towards unity. This perception is reinforced by bad timing.

The announcement of AFRICOM's formation occurred as African nations began discussing the formation of a continent-wide government similar to the European Union. According to the Concept Note of the Public Consultation of the Grand Debate on an African Union government, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union affirmed that the ultimate goal of the African Union is "full political and economic integration leading to the United States of Africa."[53] The African Union session which issued this Concept Note took place on 29-30, January 2007. President Bush announced AFRICOM's creation a week later on 6 February 2007. Some Africans do not believe the timing of the announcements were coincidental. In order to fit their perceptions, some Africans have reframed the AFRICOM announcement to fit a narrative of neo-colonial forces bent on military and economic domination in order to satisfy an American hunger for natural resources.[54] Thus, many Africans perceive AFRICOM as the militarization of US-African relations, and an attempt to use coercion to achieve US strategic goals.

In the eyes of many Africans, AFRICOM is equated with US Central Command, which is currently fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[55] So, while the US touts AFRICOM as a way to strengthen security cooperation with African nations, some Africans see the formation of AFRICOM as the prelude to military conquest in their area. For instance, Africans noticed that the 1995 US Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa stated America had "no direct vital interests in the region."[56] Africans know that this is not the situation today. At present, Nigeria is Africa's largest supplier of oil and the fifth largest global supplier of oil to the United States.[57]

The US National Intelligence Council predicts that African sources will account for 25% of total imports by 2015, versus the 15% of oil imported from Africa by the US today.[58] Comparatively, the US imports 17% of its oil from the Persian Gulf and that figure is expected to stay below 20% by 2015.[59] Africa is a leading source of natural gas, iron ore, and various precious minerals. So, in some African eyes, AFRICOM is a pre-requisite for possible military action to secure natural resources.

This perception of resource competition is reinforced by increased Russian and Chinese involvement in Africa. In order to understand their possible impact on AFRICOM's ability to manage its perceptions, an overview of Russian and Chinese activities on the African continent is warranted.

Russia in Africa

Though not commonly known in the West, trade and cultural ties between Russia and Africa go back three hundred years.[60] And the fact that Russia did not participate in the slave trade with European powers benefits them perceptually with Africans. Indeed, past Russian activities on the African continent would seem to give them an advantage. Russian volunteers participated on the African side in colonial wars against the Italians in 1896 and the British during the Boer War of 1899 – 1902.[61] After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Russia (as part of the Soviet Union) became an alternative to the West. Many Africans undertook pilgrimages to the "Red Mecca" in search of knowledge to solve problems on their continent.[62] African students became conduits for transferring knowledge about Russia deep into Africa.

During the Cold War, Russian involvement in Africa increased. Thousands of Russian technicians and political and military advisors assisted numerous newly established countries such as Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Angola, Mozambique, etc.[63] Anti-colonialist rhetoric was a staple of anti-Western propaganda. During their anti-colonial struggle, Africans were grateful for Soviet help. Since they had no colonies in Africa and spoke with anti-imperialist rhetoric, Soviet help was gladly accepted. As part of the Cold War battle for "hearts and minds," communities of young Africans sprang up in Russian cities. During the three decades of the 1960s to 1980s, hundreds of Soviet women married African students or had children by them outside of wedlock.[64] Russian-African relations remained relatively strong throughout the 1980s, until Gorbachev's perestroika (restructuring) upset this status quo.[65]

Perestroika exposed structural deficiencies in the Soviet system. With the Cold War coming to an end and the Soviet Union's economic shortcomings becoming clearly visible, some of Moscow's external commitments became too expensive to maintain. The Soviet Union could no longer afford to support client states. As the Soviet system collapsed, Russian aid stopped flowing to third world countries, and Africa, for the most part, slipped off Russia's radar.

But today, national interests have once again focused Russian attention on the African continent. Chief among these interests is the quest for natural resources. Russia is experiencing a shortage of manganese, chromium, silicon, and other minerals.[66] It is cost prohibitive to mine them in Russia.[67] Russian companies such as the State Corporation for Atomic Energy, Lukoil (Russia's largest oil company), Alrosa (which accounts for 97% of Russia's diamond production) and Rusal (Russia's leading bauxite producer) have taken steps in the last five years to begin operations in Africa.[68] Gazprom, Russia' state-run gas monopoly, is investing billions of dollars in order to gain access to gas in Angola and Nigeria. It is negotiating with Nigeria,

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Niger, and Algeria to build a pipeline to transfer Nigerian gas across the Sahara Desert to markets in Europe.[69] And Lukoil plans to explore for hydrocarbons in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.[70]

Russia is tempering its drive for natural resources with economic soft power. The Russians have forgiven $11.3 billion in Soviet-era African debts.[71] And Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has pledged $500 million in aid to developing countries, principally in Africa, over the next few years.[72] $500 million is very small when compared to the billions of dollars in aid from the US, but the African governments appreciate the donations, especially since Moscow does not add conditions such as democracy promotion, human rights, and increased economic openness in exchange for use of the funds.[73]

Russian involvement in Africa has the potential to complicate the perception of AFRICOM. During the Cold War the US and Soviet Union competed for influence in Africa by granting economic and military aid to ideologically sympathetic countries. If these old patterns of competition reemerge, Russia could attempt to frame AFRICOM as an American military front for neo-colonialism. Russia would, in effect, try to recast and replay a dominant narrative from Africa's twentieth century fight for independence from colonial rule. Russia (as part of the Soviet Union) played a role in supporting anti-colonial movements across the African continent. That these movements were predominantly Marxist governments that turned into autocratic regimes will not be facts raised by the Russians. Instead, the Russians will remind Africans of instances where America supported white minority rule, such as when President Ronald Reagan supported the apartheid South African government.[74]

In summary, Russian involvement in Africa has the potential to negatively effect the perceptions of US AFRICOM. In terms of the Kauffman model, Russia will likely make the

landscape more rugged by adding peaks and valleys to the perceptual terrain. If (or when) direct

competition with the US for resources ensues, Russia will likely warn Africans against

involvement with the US, lest they be coerced into an unequal relationship. In addition to

Russia, China has also engaged with African countries in recent years. And similar to Russian

involvement, Chinese involvement on the African continent has the potential to add complexity

to the perception of AFRICOM.

China in Africa

China has a long, and relatively unknown, history of involvement with Africa. A half a

century before Christopher Columbus' voyages, Chinese explorer Zheng He reached African

shores.[75] But, shortly after these international exploits, China turned inward. It dismantled its

maritime forces and sank into self-imposed semi-isolation for several centuries.[76] China's

experience of wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led its leaders to rethink its

past attitudes that allowed it to become weak and vulnerable to external challenges.[77] After the

Communist revolution, the Chinese under Mao Zedong took a much different approach to

China's security and its relationship with the world.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China began

focusing on relationships not only with the world's superpowers, but also specifically with

underdeveloped and developing nations.[78] During the early days of the Cold War, China chose

to concentrate on the so-called "Third World" developing nations in order to promote its own

ideological and political agenda.[79] Beijing supported many liberation movements and

insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa and was quick to establish diplomatic relations with newly

independent African states as they emerged from colonialism.[80] These relations persisted into

the post-Cold War era when most Western powers scaled back their presence.

By the 1980s and 1990s, with the fall of communism and the rise of economic reform and

pragmatism, China changed the nature of its relationships with these countries. China's focused

its foreign policy on establishing diplomatic and economic relationships to promote domestic

development and stability.[81] As the Soviet threat receded, China's leadership focused on

introducing market forces into its economy. This new economic priority and the waning role of

revolutionary ideology drew China's leaders' attention inward in order to focus on internal

development.[82]

While China viewed the Third World as an ideological battlefield during the Cold War, it

is reengaging there now for highly practical reasons – primarily to fuel its growing economy's

thirst for natural resources and to find new markets for its goods.[83] And, from the Chinese

perspective, securing these resources may be an issue of national survival. China must maintain

its current economic growth rate in order to avoid adding 25 million people to the unemployment

ranks each year.[84] It is putting 1.3 billion people through an industrial revolution with neither

colonies nor substantial indigenous resources besides coal.[85] The only way they can achieve

economic growth is through securing long term supplies of natural resources. China is the

world's largest copper consumer, and in 2005, it consumed roughly one third of the total global

output of steel, and 40% of the world's cement.[86] Also, Africa is China's primary source for

timber and ivory.[87]

Chinese investors working for state-run firms have launched an aggressive campaign in

Africa. At any given time, approximately 800 Chinese state-owned or controlled corporations

are operating in Africa, with China's Export-Import Bank funding more than 300 projects in at

least 36 countries.[88] And according to Sahr Johnny, the Sierra Leonean ambassador to China, "They (China) just come and do it. We don't hold meetings about environmental-impact assessment, human rights, bad governance and good governance. I'm not saying that's right. I'm just saying Chinese investment is succeeding because they don't set high benchmarks."[89] In pursuit of its objectives, China has shown little regard for humanitarian or ideological constraints that most democratic nations must take into account.[90]

This results-oriented philosophy demonstrates a meeting of the minds. According to Transparency International's Bribe Payers Index, Chinese companies are the second-most likely to use "payola" abroad.[91] Similarly, a World Bank survey of sixty-eight countries last year found that sub-Sahara Africa leads in the percentage of firms (43 percent) expected to give or receive gifts to secure government contracts.[92] The Royal Institute of International Affairs in London estimates that 70% of China's timber import from Sub-Saharan Africa is illegal and facilitated by bribing government officials. In Cameroon, the World Bank discovered that a Chinese company falsified the origin of logs to deceive export controls. Extensive research by several environmental organizations revealed that Chinese companies were able to continue their illegal activities by bribing government officials, from the lowest administrative level to the higher echelon of cabinet ministers.[93]

Chinese-African cooperation is taking place in defense matters as well. China has established military relations with several African countries based on military cooperation, weapons sales, and assistance.[94] Due to a lack of transparency, exact figures are hard to discern. But between 1996 and 2003, it is estimated that Chinese arms sales to Africa were second only to Russia's, making up roughly fourteen percent ($900 million) of Africa's total conventional arms imports.[95] And Beijing's January 2006 Africa policy white paper states:

China will promote high-level military exchanges between the two sides and actively carry out military-related technological exchanges and cooperation. It will continue to help train African military personnel and support defense and army building of African countries for their own security.[96]

In the words of Zimbabwe's current leader Robert Mugabe, China has become "an alternative global power point" in Africa.[97] Their effectiveness as a counterpoint represents perceptual challenges for AFRICOM. Beijing sees African nations as valuable backers in its struggle against American "hegemony".[98] Beijing is effective in drawing a distinction between itself and the US, which serves its interest by coloring the perception of American involvement in Africa as disadvantageous globalization.[99]

In light of recent developments, there is a sense of discomfort and growing uncertainty in the US of Chinese engagement in Africa. This uncertainty stems from two sources worthy of note.[100] First, there is limited understanding of African opinion of China's engagement in the continent. African sentiment may be the deciding factor in shaping what China can continue to do in Africa. Second, there are unknown risks with China's Africa policy. China's financial and political investments may bring short term gains for Beijing, but their long term effects on Africa's dealings with the US are hard to determine.

China could be seen as neo-colonialist if it overplays its hand. China has already faced criticism from a Zambian presidential candidate during the 2006 elections that it engaged in unfair mine labor practices.[101] And South African trade unions are opposing the flooding of South African markets by Chinese textiles.[102]

Americans lack good information on China' long-term intentions in Africa.[103] The US must gain accurate knowledge of these intentions to better manage AFRICOM's perceptions.

Without this knowledge, the true nature of the perceptual terrain will remain unknown, and will likely lead to rough travels.

Conclusion

As the newest military command borne out of the necessity to better synchronize the Department of Defense's efforts on the African continent, AFRICOM's image will be formed, in large part, by the perceptual management techniques inherent in its communications strategy. If this is indeed the case, AFRICOM may mismanage its perception among Africans due to an incomplete understanding of the different frames and narratives used in the African media and a lack of awareness regarding the nature of the Sub-Saharan African perceptual terrain. We must gain understanding of the complexities of African cultural variation. We must account for the continued influence of former European colonial powers. There is a reservoir of perceptual positivity on the African continent which the US military can build upon. However, the current communications strategy will hamper these efforts.

The current US approach to communications is guided by the message influence model, which assumes that the perceptual landscape is simple. This is not the case in the AFRICOM area of operations. In addition to African cultural factors and accounting for the continued influence of past colonial powers, we must deal with complexities introduced by Russia and China as they pursue natural resources. The way forward for managing perceptions by AFRICOM must take all of these complexities into account.

Final Recommendations

AFRICOM's perceptual terrain is rugged. And Russian and Chinese actions will likely make it even more rugged. We must accept this as fact and move ahead. Research can help deal with this ruggedness.

There are resources readily available to help with this task. The records of each service's history repository (e.g. the Air Force Historical Research Agency) should be scoured for information on successful and unsuccessful American military encounters with Africa. This basic step will highlight potential pitfalls we should avoid. Likewise, reviewing unit histories of geographically-oriented special operations units and foreign internal defense teams will yield useful information as well. But this basic research is just a first step. Other actions are needed.

The overall themes in a strategic communications plan may be developed centrally, but, as the command closest to the area of operations, AFRICOM must assume the lead role in framing its narrative on the African continent. Navigating the rugged perceptual landscape requires experimentation and trial and error in order to develop successful communications strategies. This will require loosening the tight control wielded by central authorities such as the White House Global Communications Office. Properly empowered, the unit in the field in daily contact with friendly (and potentially adversarial) forces is most favorably positioned to lead our team to mission success. There will doubtlessly be setbacks as we move up and down peaks and valleys in search of the best way to communicate our message, but we must be willing to accept risk in pursuit of overall success.

The US is neither a gatekeeper nor chaperone of others' involvement on the African continent; we are merely important players on a broadening and more intensely competitive playing field. AFRICOM is the newest, latest, construct for focusing American instruments of

power towards achieving mutually beneficial goals. We are likely to encounter competition from

Russia and China. If given the flexibility to frame its own narrative and control its own message,

AFRICOM can be successful in managing its own perception.

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